

ThisLife



HEALTH
by Ruth Nichol

Water world

One school's effort to tackle bad behaviour is having other beneficial effects.

Yendarra School principal Susan Dunlop wasn't thinking about her students' teeth when she asked the school's board of trustees to introduce a water-only drinking policy in 2006.

She was concerned about behaviour problems at the decile 1 primary school in the Auckland suburb of Otara, which she believed were caused by children consuming too many sugary drinks.

"There was a culture of fizzy drinks at the school; parents were coming into the school drinking them, as well as children. Behaviour was bad, attendance was bad, truancy was a problem. We had aggressive, overweight children."

That all changed once children were encouraged to drink only water at school. "We never use words like 'rules' or 'not allowed'," says Dunlop. They were better behaved, healthier and their learning improved.

Soon, a healthy-eating programme saw their waistlines reducing, too. As it turned out, changes

were also happening in their mouths. A recent study found that Yendarra pupils have healthier teeth than children from similar schools in the area.

Headed by Auckland epidemiologist Simon Thornley and



published in the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, the study compared the dental records of 428 current and former Yendarra students aged eight to 11 with those of 3385 children from nine nearby schools. It found Yendarra pupils had an average of 0.37 fewer decayed, missing or filled teeth than those from schools without a water-only policy.

The difference may not sound large, but as Thornley points out, it's the equivalent of one less decay-affected tooth for every three children.

"It's a significant difference when you think about how many rotten teeth dentists or dental nurses have to deal with – one tooth less for every three kids is actually a lot," he says.

The school's pupils were also half as likely to have had a tooth pulled out than children from the other schools.

The results of the study provide the first evidence that encouraging children to drink only water at school can have a real effect on their oral health. More importantly, it's cheaper, simpler and more effective than programmes that focus on better



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toothbrushing techniques or applying fluoride directly onto children's teeth – and it can help prevent obesity and diabetes.

The results come at a time when the rates of dental decay in children are rising after many years of decline. In 2016, 7650 children had to have dental treatment under general anaesthetic – at a cost of \$17.4 million – compared with 4646 in 2004.

Dentists have no doubt what is fuelling the rise: the increasing consumption of sugary drinks (including fruit juice). Figures from 2015 suggest that New Zealanders now consume 115 litres of soft drinks a year.

Rob Beaglehole, principal dental officer for the Nelson Marlborough District Health Board, is very familiar with the damage sugary drinks do to children's teeth.

"The No 1 reason children get holes in their teeth is sugary drinks," he says. "I just saw a five-year-old boy who had been drinking sports drinks and had to have 10 teeth taken out, which cost about \$4000."

It's the first evidence that encouraging children to drink only water can affect their oral health.

Beaglehole heads a New Zealand Dental Association campaign to help reduce the consumption of sugary drinks, some of which contain 16 teaspoons of sugar in a 350ml can. As part of the campaign, the association is encouraging schools and early-childhood education centres to introduce water-only policies. "Until the Government takes a leadership role, we're calling on principals and boards of trustees to make the decision themselves," he says.

According to a 2015 survey, 10% of schools are water-only, though the figure may be higher once those that don't have a formal policy are included. Although some schools worry they might get flak from parents if they go water-only, that hasn't been the case at Yendarra.

In fact, Dunlop says parents have embraced the concept, with many now adopting the policy at home and at non-school social gatherings.

"I went to a function last year with about 200 family members from our school and the only drink being served was water." ■

HEALTH BRIEFS

COOKING KILLS MILLIONS

Millions of women in developing countries are dying from what US sociologist Kelly Austin calls a silent killer – the indoor air pollution caused by cooking on solid-fuel open fires or poorly constructed stoves. In a research paper in *Population and Environment*, Austin says 4.3 million people die every year from indoor air pollution, most of them women and children. She says the problem can be solved by giving women more economic opportunities so they spend less time cooking and can afford cleaner fuel sources.

ABUSE TRIGGERS PUBERTY

Girls who experience childhood sexual abuse reach puberty up to a year earlier than those who don't, putting them at greater risk of mental health problems during their teenage years and reproductive cancers later in life. A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* suggests the difference is the result of stress hormones released as a result of the abuse.

RUNNING KIDNEY RISK

Marathon running causes short-term kidney problems, say US researchers. A Yale University study found that 82% of marathon runners had stage 1 acute kidney injury (AKI) soon after finishing a race. This went

away in a couple of days, but the researchers say more work is needed to understand the effects on the kidneys of repeated strenuous activity.



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